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ABSTRACT

Both written and spoken language use need to be understood within a broader theory of language. Some of the core assumptions that would inform such a theory are as follows. First, language is inherently social. Every structural component of language has a history of social discourse that defines it. Second, language is for communication; meaning is jointly constructed through conversation. Third, language is dynamic, not static--this is true in the sense that a culture is continually revising its language and it is also true in the sense that every individual invents language anew, makes it his or her own. Yet if meaning is constructed by every conversational participant and every writer and reader of a text through an interweaving of social and personal meanings, then each individual constructs a different set of meanings in any discourse. How can the participants in the discourse be said to share meaning if they do not construct the same meanings? This is the central paradox of the notion of shared meaning. It could be resolved by denying either that language meaning is constructed socially or constructed individually. Or, alternatively, it could be resolved by recognizing that meaning need not be the same to be shared. Learning through conversation to recognize others' perspectives and to strive for shared understandings prepares children for similar but more multi-layered and multi-voiced tasks in listening to stories or (later) reading. (Contains 19 references.) (TB)

Learning Language and Learning Literacy:

Construction of Meaning through Discourse

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Abstract

Processes of constructing and negotiating meaning are at the core of children's learning of both language and literacy. Within a constructivist theory of language, spoken and written language are seen as social, communicative, cognitive, and dynamic. Context is central for the construction, sharing, and interpretation of meaning both socially and cognitively Yet the fundamental purpose of sharing meaning is inherently paradoxical. Parallels and interdependencies of spoken and written discourse, as revealed through examples of language used with children, are suggested.

Learning Language and Learning Literacy:

Construction of Meaning through Discourse

Through talking, listening, and processes of spoken discourse, as well as through writing, reading, and literate discourse around texts, people use language to construct meanings and children learn to construct meanings through language.[1] Two kinds of spaces, In Here and Out There, act as organizing metaphors to represent two kinds of meaning construction, cognitive and social. The spaces In Here are private, individual, and of the mind/body. In Here includes: cognitions, personal knowledge and beliefs, personal history of experiences and memories, aims and intentions, feelings, and the personal signification of every word, form, text, and nuance of language.

The spaces Out There are public, social, and of the cultural or physical realm. Out There includes: "common knowledge" or cultural capital; social things, institutions, events, and processes; physical things, events, and processes; discourses and discourse communities; conventions of language; and literary canons interwoven through intertextuality. Construction of meaning through spoken or written discourse takes place simultaneously In Here and Out There, and the relationships between personal and social meanings are filled with tension. The match is uncertain (though it may feel certain), ever-changing, and ambiguous. A person has access to social meanings only through interaction with cultural artifacts, or by observation of or participation in social events and discourse. Social meanings are not directly located in the artifacts or events, but are inferred through an interpretive process of searching one's own personal knowledge and

[1]People also construct meaning in ways other than through language, but that topic is beyond the scope of this paper.

understandings. Thus they take on a certain individual cast as they become one's own. While people can check their interpretations by observing the effects of their words or actions on others, representations in the social realm necessarily are understood at multiple levels and from different perspectives, and so are never certain or static.

An Encompassing Vision of Language

Both written and spoken language use need to be understood within a broader theory of language. The practice of separating language into "reading," "writing," "text," "talking," "listening," and "discourse," or into even smaller bits like "writing processes," "fairy tales," "decoding," "morphological structure," and "turn-taking in discourse," while a useful analytic, leads us away from seeing parallels in how we make meaning through all forms of language (Davidson, 1993). Certainly we can learn interesting things about language and people by studying turn-taking or fairy tales, but in order to ask how people make meaning or share meaning, or to begin to understand how children's learning of language and their learning of literacy are related, we must place these fractured components back into a more encompassing theory of language. I will not attempt this huge task here, but will simply outline some core assumptions that would inform such a theory.

First, language is inherently social. It is socially constructed. Every structural component of language, every way of using language, every meaning that can be taken from language, whether written, spoken, or thought, has a history of social discourse that defines it, and itself potentially can re-enter and re-define social discourse. By way of example, take any word -- "muffin," "interface," "dumb," or a small child's "goed" -- and it is clear that each word comes trailing a whole history of meanings, situations, and

implications that both constrain its use and can be modified through its use.[2] This point about social construction of meaning is not limited to words, but applies to all components and aspects of language, from phonology and syntax through to discourse structures, suprasegmentals, and literary genres.

A second central idea is that language is for communication. In conversation, meaning is jointly constructed through the interactions of people who alternate the roles of speaker and listener. In written language, writers construct a text for an implied reader. The implied writer stands behind a text as a reader reads it, or as critics talk about it. "Meaning (communication) implies community" (Todorov, 1984, p. 30).

Research on language acquisition over the last twenty years has shown that young children's language learning takes place in a communicative context (Bates, 1976; Pappas, Kiefer, & Levstik, 1990; Snow, Midkiff-Borunda, Small, & Proctor, 1984; Wilkinson, 1982). Children participate in conversations. The context supplied by the "here and now," and the background knowledge shared by the communicative partners support the meanings carried by language. Furthermore, adults or older children conversing with young children carry a great deal of the communicative burden by filling in much of the conversational structure and context, guessing, repairing breakdowns, and acknowledging and elaborating messages that they have understood. Young language learners and their older communicative partners persist with conversation because they have a mutual goal -- that of communicating with each other. "I want a cookie." "Don't touch the teapot -- hot!" "Where Daddy go?" "Now let's be princesses." Movements in

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[2]Contrast the meanings of these, for example, with "cupcake," "meet," "non-speaking," and "went."

schools towards whole language approaches, integrating language across the curriculum, and using discourse to scaffold academic learning take up this notion of language as having a fundamental communicative purpose (Bloome & Theodorou, 1988; Pappas, Kiefer, & Levstik, 1990).

Yet, just as it is socially constructed and has a communicative purpose, language is also cognitive. Language is cognitively constructed and reconstructed by people as they learn and use language throughout their lives, and language plays a role in structuring thought. As children learn language, they construct grammars (Bloom & Lahey, 1978), phonological systems (Ingram, 1976), pragmatic rules for language use (Prutting, 1982), rules for relating orthographic and phonemic representations in written language (Adams, 1990), and so on. Vygotsky suggested that, although speech and thought have different ontogenetic roots, at a certain point in a child's development around age two, spoken language and thought converge so that "thought becomes verbal, and speech rational" (1986, p. 82). For Vygotsky, spoken language internalized by a child becomes verbal thought (inner speech). Bialystok and Ryan (1985) argue that the development of metalinguistic ability -- the ability to think about and make judgments about language -- is fundamentally cognitive. Moreover, they see metalinguistic skills as prerequisite for children's development of literacy beyond its rudimentary beginnings in conversational routines.

Another central idea is that language is dynamic, not static. We can see this at many levels. For example, one can trace historical language change through texts or comparison of the spoken language of geographically contiguous language groups to see how, over time, new languages emerge from diverging dialects, or languages die through the dictates of politics. The existence of different English "accents," the emergence of

new vocabulary (e.g., "login," "software," or "modem"), the changing connotations of words (e.g., "crippled," "modern," and "consumption"), and variations in grammar, morphology, spelling or punctuation in colloquial usage (e.g., "apple's" for "apples;" ungendered "they" for a singular, gender-unspecified "he or she") all provide daily evidence of language change.

Yet this notion of the dynamic nature of language is even more profound when one considers that each child learning a language in a sense invents it anew. My language that I have constructed is necessarily different than your language that you have constructed. Not only is it different, but every time I use language in spoken discourse, or to read or write, I potentially re-negotiate certain nuances of meaning, or add a new word to my vocabulary, or hear an expression emphasized in a new way. So my language is always undergoing reconstruction, and through my interactions with others I may influence their language just as they influence mine, and all together, over time, each of us contributes to the flow of language change.

On the face of it, these two ideas that language is socially constructed, and that individuals cognitively construct language, might seem incompatible. In examining language use to determine how meanings are constructed, we want to freeze it and pin it down like a dead thing to dissect it. Yet the construction and reconstruction happens through doing; language is dynamic. In order to understand how meanings are negotiated and shared, we need to consider how language is embedded in context, and how we use context to construct meanings. This process of constructing meaning is ongoing, contextual, and never to be completed. Furthermore, the idea of sharing meaning is itself inherently paradoxical.

Multiple Layers of Context

Spoken discourse is situated within multiple layers of context, and by reference to context, participants in discourse are able to understand, negotiate, and collaboratively construct meaning. The writers and readers of written language seldom share the same physical or social context. Because of this, written language is said to be "disembedded" or "de-contextualized" (Pappas, Kiefer, Levstik, 1990). Yet, this does not mean that context is unimportant in written language. To communicate successfully with readers, a writer must construct context through and around the text. Readers must take the words of the text and weave them into and interpret them through their own experiences and knowledge about how stories work, in order to reconstruct the story and imagine the context that animates it. So, although these processes differ in significant ways, nevertheless the construction and interpretation of meaning depends on layers of context in both spoken and written language.[3]

Four different layers of context inform the construction and negotiation of meaning in face-to-face spoken discourse. First, there is the extra-linguistic information about the environment that comes from Out There, and is usually labelled "context" (Pappas et al., 1990). This includes the physical setting, the social setting, the immediate situation, and the other people present. A second layer, labelled by Pappas and

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[3]In my discussion of written language here, I am using the example of literary texts. As Barton (1994) has pointed out, however, most of the reading and writing most people do each day does not involve literary texts. For example, people might read the newspaper, their mail, advertising flyers, and office memos. They might write a note to the school, a cheque, a supply list, or take the minutes of an office or club meeting. These kinds of texts also supply and rely on contextual knowledge for successful communication.

colleagues as "co-text" also is located Out There. This includes the language in which the current bit of meaning under negotiation is embedded -- that is, what has already been said and understood, and what is expected to be said.

The third and fourth layers of context come from In Here. The third level of context is that historical or experiential knowledge that a person assumes other discourse participants share. Negotiation of shared meaning depends on speakers being able to take others' perspectives, to determine what might not be known, and then to supply that information explicitly in the co-text or context. It also depends on listeners being able to recognize that they are missing some key bit of information, or that they are not understanding, and then influencing the discourse to get the background information they need to reach a shared understanding with the other participants.

For example, my one-year-old son and I have often engaged in a routine when I put on his socks. As I put on the first sock, I say, "one sock," and then as I put on the second sock, I say "two socks." After some time my son has begun to take a bigger role in this routine. Putting on the first sock, I say "one sock." But as I begin to put on the second sock, he chimes in with "two sock." If I am in a hurry dressing him and forget to engage in this routine, he sometimes prompts "two sock" as I put on his socks. Because we both share the experience of this routine, I can understand "two sock" as an initiation of the sock-language routine. If he were to prompt a baby-sitter with "two sock," the baby-sitter would not understand this as a request to engage in a language routine because she would not share the same set of experiences that provide the context to grasp this meaning. This level of assumed shared knowledge is typically implicit, and many discourse participants might only become aware of it when attempts at communication break down.

A fourth level of context that is personal and almost always remains implicit is an individual's prior knowledge, intentions, and beliefs. Whatever a person says, despite all these other layers of contextual information, is framed by his or her prior knowledge, intentions, and beliefs. Whatever a person comes to understand from discourse is achieved through reference to what he or she already knows.

Writers, by contrast, typically do not construct text collaboratively with readers. Writers and their writing are separated in space and time from readers and their reading (Pappas et al., 1990). Nevertheless, these same four layers of context play a role in both writing and reading.

A writer imagines a reader and constructs the story for and in interaction with that imagined reader. This might not happen explicitly. A writer might pose as her own reader, and tell the story to herself. Through reference to her own experiences, the writer imagines the context -- the physical and social setting, the situation, the characters, and their problems or conflicts -- and then creates it in the text. The written words express not only the content, but also the context.

The context that frames the story, in order to reach the page, undergoes many transformations and reconstructions. First are the things and events of the physical or social world that were perceived and experienced by the writer, then constructed as her knowledge. In the process of retrieving these experiences as memories, they are reconstructed (Robinson & Swanson, 1990), then again deliberately reconstructed by the writer to serve her literary purposes. The story with all its contextual detail is fabricated in some space in the mind, played with, revised, rehashed. It undergoes the transformation to words, and is structured into sentences -- sentences flowing into voices

flowing into interconnected text. The text is written, rewritten, revised. The writer's text contains the writer's context.

There is the linguistic level of context, the co-text. The words that have been written frame and foreshadow the words still to be written. Each part of the text -- vocabulary, sentence structure, rhythm, and sequencing -- relies on other parts and the way the parts go together as a whole. The co-text, constructed by the writer alone as contrasted with the conversational construction of co-text in spoken discourse, provides linguistic context that integrates each part. Each word and aspect of text structure invokes its web of social meanings.

Shared knowledge also provides a kind of context. The writer assumes readers share certain knowledge with her -- cultural knowledge, or knowledge of literary genre, for example. Writers for young children are especially cautious about assuming shared knowledge. A writer of children's books anticipates what the children for whom she is writing might know, and what perspectives they might hold. She deliberately provides contextual elements to cue recognition of these shared understandings, and also to establish "new" background knowledge. She might use opening devices such as, "Once upon a time..." or "Rocks are interesting..." to cue children about genre. For very young children, repeating a sequence of words with a slight variation, or using rhythm and rhyme, are ways to mark text read aloud as different from spoken language. Pictures in picture books provide some of the context for the written text (Stinson, 1991). Texts become more inclusive through explicit establishment of shared knowledge, and more exclusive and arcane as more shared knowledge is assumed.

Finally, the writer creates a text that is a product of her own implicit personal knowledge and beliefs. The coherence of the writer's perspective gives the writing

texture and integrity. Yet this implicit personal level of context, because the writer herself is unaware of much of it, is often the source of transitions in the text that a reader perceives as jarring, seemingly illogical sequences, or intrusions of the writer's voice. The writer who creates a text might be unable to "see" the meanings arising from this implicit and unavailable personal context. Thus the text, before it reaches the reader, is already contextualized by the layers of context intentionally constructed by the writer, the unintentional subtext of the writer's implicit knowledge and beliefs, and the wider social meanings of its words and linguistic forms.

A person reading a text sees only a sequential string of words on a page. Whether he speaks the text aloud or transforms it into ghostly speech in his mind, spoken language is recreated and the writer talks to the reader. There in the text are the words that invoke the writer's constructed physical and social context, the linguistic context, the assumed shared knowledge (metalinguistic, metasocial, metaphysical), and the writer's unintended implicit subtext. But the reader sees only the string of words.

To read the text, the reader must construct meanings from the words and text structures. In constructing meaning, he interprets the textual record of the writer's context through his own experiences and understandings, and through his own take on the meanings of the words and text structures. The implicit meanings that the writer had assumed were shared will necessarily be supplied differently than the writer intended, as the reader has a different perspective. The reader might be able to read the implicit unintended subtext in ways the writer herself could not. The reader might miss any part of the writer's intended or unintended meanings. And all of the text will be reconstructed by the reader through his own implicit knowledge, beliefs, assumptions, and values. Like the writer, he probably is not aware of this level of contextualization.

This process of reading, recontextualizing, and reconstructing the text takes on yet another level of interpretation and reconstruction when an adult reads aloud to a child listener. The adult constructs meaning as he reads. The child constructs her own meanings as she hears the adult speak aloud and interpret the text.

The text each reader reads or each listener hears and the meanings he takes from it are not the writer's text or meanings, nor those of other readers, but his own. The meanings are slippery, changeable. They change shape from draft to draft, from writer to reader, and from reader to reader, from reader to listener, and from reading to reading. Although the words can be written down, frozen in a black line across a page, the meaning cannot. The meaning is not in the text, but in the understandings of those people writing and reading the text, just as in spoken discourse, the meaning is not in the stream of phonemes, but in the minds of the participants.

The Problem of Shared Meaning

This brings us around in a circle. Language is for communication. Pappas, Kiefer, and Levstik say, "for any conversation to have any success at all, speakers and listeners have to be sure that they are talking about the same thing, sharing the same meanings" (1990, p. 9). Yet, if meaning is constructed by every conversational participant and every writer and reader of text through an interweaving of social and personal meanings, then each individual constructs a different set of meanings in any discourse. How can the participants in the discourse be said to share meaning if they do not construct the *same* meanings, or come to the *same* understandings? This is the central paradox of the notion of shared meaning.

One way to resolve this is to deny that each person cognitively constructs linguistic meaning. We could claim that predominant meanings are socially constructed

through a kind of averaging process, with the influence of certain members of society having a greater weight, perhaps (Galtung, 1981). Each individual receives the collective meanings of the group.

Alternatively, we could deny that meanings are socially constructed. Every word, every text, every conversation has one true meaning, and deviations from it in individual interpretations represent imperfections. In this platonic view, cognitive constructions of meaning are developmental approximations that approach the Truth.

For me, a more satisfying resolution hinges on questioning the assumption that meanings must be the same to be shared, and that sharing can or ought to be certain and complete. Certainty of meaning in language equals stasis, and stasis equals death of the language. As suggested by Bakhtin (cf., Davidson, 1993; Edlund, 1988; Todorov, 1984), texts are polyvocal, and the tension of many competing voices provides their richness. In order to share meaning, we can imagine that which is outside of our experience (Egan, 1986). We can construct our own take on another person's perspective that might bring our mutual understanding close enough so that some sense of shared meaning is obtained, although same meaning is not. In writing, it doesn't usually matter if meanings differ among readers and writer. When it does, we resort to the concrete (e.g., pictures), or we invent a closed system or code to accomplish the task (Barton, 1994).

Learning Language and Learning Literacy

Literacy learning parallels learning of spoken language. Children's participation in spoken discourse, and literacy activities that lead up to and include reading and writing, both support language learning and depend on language learning. The central tasks for children in both learning of spoken discourse and learning of literacy is to learn

to construct, negotiate, and share meanings. Meanings are framed by context for speakers and listeners, readers and writers, and negotiating meanings depends on establishing context.

As children develop as communicators, they learn to evaluate to what extent their conversational partners share their knowledge or perspectives. What people say and how they respond in conversation depends on what they assume others know and understand. Similarly, as their store of world knowledge and experience increases, children's language becomes elaborated with a multiplicity of associated connections, themes, and interpretations. They learn to understand and express subtle nuances of meaning. They become sophisticated creaters of co-text, and thus less limited to physical context for expressing and interpreting meanings. Similarly, the picture-text relationship in picture books, so important for situating meaning in literature for young children, fades in importance as children learn to construct multiple layers of context as they interpret and create written text.

Learning through conversation to recognize others' perspectives and to strive for shared understandings prepares children for similar but more multi-layered and multi-voiced tasks in listening to stories or (later) reading. Furthermore, many of the repetitive language games, songs, and routines adults engage in with young language learners establish familiarity with the rudiments of different genres of literature. These events and routines in language learning establish a framework for literacy learning.

As children learn literacy, language learning unfolds in new directions. Poetry and stories provide different contexts for learning language -- a language of images, a language for imaginative play, and a language for working out conflicts. More voices are added to the conversation, more ways of looking at topic become accessible, and

meanings become both less certain and more imbued with possibilities. As they learn to tell stories and write, children's perception of themselves as communicators expands. They discover powerful ways to contribute to the ongoing social conversation.

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